European war Sermons

Christian Duty and the War

PART OF A SERMON ON THE TEXT

"Blessed are the Meek"

DELIVERED AT CLAREMONT
CALIFORNIA, MARCH 18, 1917

BY
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THERE is not much response in these days to the text, "Blessed Are the Meek," even tho it is a saying of Jesus. We are thinking for the most part along other lines. And yet it is of no use to try to evade or escape any important teaching of the Great Teacher, if we are genuinely his disciples. The only way of peace and happiness is that of obedience to the spirit of his commands. And it is our chief desire to learn more of him,—not to escape or weaken his influence, but to make it more and more controlling in our lives and in the life of society. We set ourselves to obey his will, however little it may be to our liking.

There can be no question that in this insistence upon meekness and gentleness we have one of the most characteristic messages of our Lord. He said of himself that he was meek and lowly of heart; and the disciple was to be as his master. Taken with the other beatitudes, this utterance gives us an unmistakably clear and consistent picture of the type of character that should belong to the new kingdom of brotherly men. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (the spiritually humble), "Blessed are they that mourn," "Blessed are the meek," "Bessed are the merciful," "Blessed are the peacemakers,"—we simply cannot escape from the compelling directness of this picture of what a son or daughter of God should be. Not proud, superior, masterful, belligerently insistent on one's rights; but gentle, considerate, forgiving, overcoming evil with good.

In these brief sayings Jesus was not laying down the chief points of the moral law, he was emphasizing certain characteristics of men of the new order, that were peculiarly dear to him and that in his day supremely needed emphasis. His own people were fierce, truculent, revengeful, fighters to the death. They were good haters. Out of that natural environment and to such an audience Jesus set forth these divine qualities of soul. They were not individual peculiarities of his own, unworkable in the practical work-day of society; they were obviously rooted in an eternal fitness, because in harmony with the character of God.

In all this we bow to his authority. We acknowledge his superior insight into life, both human and divine. We honestly wish to be his disciples, even if it makes us a peculiar people.

But we are cast today into circumstances of great perplexity. What is the bearing of these words upon national obligation? It is war of which we are all thinking today, not gentleness or forgiveness. We are trying to live up to the best that is in us, and yet we cannot seem to find a way of honor and righteousness that is a way of peace. What should we desire of our government, if we are to be true to the example and spirit of Jesus?

We cannot dogmatize, is our answer to such inquiries as these. We have no specific teachings to fall back upon. The words of Jesus are singularly devoid of any reference to the duties of the state. We cannot even argue out the matter as convincingly as we might wish. Our chief guide, after all, must be a robust common-sense, all informed and guided by sympathy with the great principles of Jesus' living and teaching. There are some things we see instinctively, that we are puzzled wholly to ravel out from their entangling perplexities. We cannot waver in our attitude regarding them, even tho we cannot relate them, to our entire satisfaction, with all the other articles of our belief.

We feel instinctively that we have no more right to surrender the rights of another than we have to be belligerently self-assertive about our own. As soon as the principle of trusteeship appears, the whole situation sensibly alters. If we are the trusted protector of another's interests, the path of duty and honor is evidently not the same as when personal comfort or interest alone is at stake. This fact was plainly illustrated in the life of Jesus. He did not come to judge, to condemn, or to maintain his rights. All these things he left to another, who would not suffer justice to fall to the ground. He himself suffered outrage, abuse, injustice, without resistence. "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth."

But he was a very rock in his championship of the rights of others. If he was the "Lamb of God" so also was he "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah." He was fearless and inflexible as adamant in standing for the spiritual rights of his people. He resisted and defied the will and the law of the leaders of his people. They did not think him meek and lowly when he stood over that aged woman in the synagogue,—bowed together with disease,—and denounced their heartlessness and defied their oppressive law, and healed her in their presence, even tho he declared war on the whole body of priests and lawyers by so doing. He arraigned and exposed to their face —not privately or in any way that could be forgiven or forgotten—those who devoured widows' houses, making long prayers as a pretense. He branded them as hypocrites, full in the presence of the crowd, so that neither they nor the people might have any doubt that there could be no peace or truce between them. And in the temple, where greedy men fleeced the pilgrims who came up from the country, he drove traders bodily from the temple courts and upset their tables, and challenged in righteous wrath the priestly ring who fattened on the traffic. To all those oppressors of the poor and meek he threw down the gauntlet of a war that would know no let-up while he lived. And they saw to it that the time was short!

With us as individuals the law of love leads clearly to an ever greater gentleness and long suffering. We can well understand one's arriving at the reasoned conclusion that in case of an altercation he would rather be shot than shoot. But the man who is set by God as the father of a family—of a wife and little ones—who would stand by and see them abused and tortured when he could do anything in their defence, is less than human. We do not argue about it. Being made as God made us we know it. And the more gentle and unselfish the man, the more terrible is his wrath.

A government is the protector of its people. It holds the shield of defence and order over the weak and defenceless. Their security and happiness are dependent on its stern faithfulness to its duty as trustee of the rights of millions. In our

own land there are one hundred million who look to the state for the maintenance of their right to a safe and quiet life. It is a trust so vast that we see in it a faint reflection of the watchful providence of God. This is what Paul had in mind when he said that the civil power was "a minister of God, who beareth not the sword in vain." In proportion to its power is its obligation to maintain righteousness and justice wherever the fundamental rights of its people are imperiled by lawless men.

What then is our government to do in the presence of this last invasion of the immemorial rights of helpless and non-resisting humanity—an invasion so ruthless, so cruel, so self-confident, that the world stands as much bewildered as aghast to see the slow gains of civilization, hardly acquired through many centuries of self-restraint, scattered to the winds as tho we were doomed to go back to the days of Assyria and Babylon, at the sole will of a little group of military autocrats? The drowning of hundreds of women and children on the Lusitania, the dropping of terrific explosives on that great, pitiful rabbit-warren of the crowded homes of East London, the carrying into a hated slavery under threat of death the men and even the women and girls of a conquered country, the slow and deliberate massacre of hundreds of thousands of the weakest and most inoffensive in Armenia, the long catalogue of incredible barbarities, beyond the common horrors of war, lengthening each day—what are we to do in the presence of this devastating cruelty that darkens the life of our generation?

What shall our government do, that has so long stood by irresolute, a very giant in strength, even if not a Greatheart in spirit? We may say that these are not our women, not our children, and that if we shut our eyes and stop our ears we need not be too much incommoded by the cries that have entered into the ears of the God of Sabaoth. But it is no longer true. The tide of the invasion has risen until it is our own citizens whose lives are imperiled, and he is blind indeed who does not see that if this ruthlessness prevails, unchecked, every

little home in these peaceful States will be under the shadow of a menace of fear through coming years.

The problem is indeed confused. We may justly say that war is no way of settling disputes, and that the last basic realities of human life, the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, forbid us to take our brother's life. But does the appeal of human brotherhood not cry trumpet-tongued from the millions of non-combatants who have already been swept away by the ruthlessness of the present struggle? They say that in all Servia there remain no children under three years of age, and in much of Poland the same slaughter of the innocents will soon have been concluded. Is there any calculating the waste and desolation of life that must follow within one generation if the successful policy of frightfulness in war is suffered to intrench itself in modern civilization? If life is what we reverence, if the untimely taking off of men and women is what we shrink from, then let us strike quickly and strike hard at an unbridled militarism before its devastation of humanity goes farther. "Am I my brother's keeper" is a divinely trenchant word that cuts deeper than our first thought perceives. If possibly one must choose between Herod and the innocents, whose life should the pacifist hold sacred?

Jesus defied and resisted the oppressive ways of men drunk with pride and power, and it brought his death.

A great nation similarly resists the oppressive onslaught of the strong, and it brings—what? Inevitable war! Unless indeed the government takes the unthinkable course of abdicating its functions as the divinely constituted protector of its people, and lies down supine to be trampled on at the will of its antagonist. To stand upright, holding the shield undaunted against the assailant, may be as stern and sacred a duty as any that deals with nobler passions than those so soon unleashed by war. "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." But if President Wilson should summon Congress to the open declaration of war it will be on his part—as all know—no act of wrath; but after many months of patient effort, one of grave, solemn fidelity to an inescap-

able obligation. And those who should go forward to death in answer to his call would give the last drop of their blood for a high and holy cause—that the world may have rest from those who live by war.

This is the conclusion to which we come, solemnly and reluctantly, as those who would face all sides of God's will for human society.

And now, when all this has been said, we may affirm confidently—looking to the future—that the militaristic spirit is the enemy of the human race. It is the very antithesis of the spirit of Jesus. It may be reinforced by a state church, but it is none the less in permanent and furious hostility to the spirit of His kingdom. Whether in Austria or Japan or Great Britain or the United States it leads on to an insolence of pride and power that makes true brotherhood impossible.

As for the future, it is not with the man of war, whether in Europe or America, but with Jesus Christ. The statesmen of commanding eminence will be those who deliberately choose his standards, and not those who plan for national advance through weight of armament. The new day is the day of emerging brotherhood, not of the superman or the hero of the stone age. And it is for the disciples of Jesus to hold their country inflexibly to the demand for a world league for peace, that shall make preparedness for peace—not war—the desire and the practice of all nations.